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ABSTRACT

One way to help teachers know how to give better assistance to students is to have students analyze their papers in a letter or memo attached to their essays. In one class, such memos are called "Learning from your own writing process," and typically describe: (1) what the student was trying to do; (2) what seemed to work or not work in the writing process or in the workshop and peer evaluation process; (3) how the paper developed and changed; (4) what major decisions were made in composing/revising; (5) what parts students want the teacher to look at in particular; and (6) what was learned from the assignment. Students thus become active participants in the evaluation/revision process rather than passive recipients. Self-evaluation is crucial to the development of an individual's perception of writing as an important and "natural" way to investigate problems and present ideas. (Four appendixes contain memo instructions, a student memo, and a student essay that contains the teacher's response to the student memo. (SR)

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Extending the Context of Evaluation: Writing Letters, Not Merely Letter Grades

Barbara C. Rhodes

Researchers and teachers such as Nancy Sommer ("Responding to student writing" 1982), Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch ("Teacher commentary on student writing" 1981), and Nina D. Ziv ("The effect of teacher comments on the writing of four college freshmen" 1984) have explored and reported on some of the inherent problems of responding to student writing: teacher comments are misunderstood, ignored, and often discourage students.

Much of the traditional approach puts all of the responsibility for evaluation on the teacher while the student shares little of that responsibility and learns little from the process, except for carrying out teacher directives for revision.

I will demonstrate (would like to present) the use of letters or memos between students and teachers as a way of dealing with some of the problems of "grading papers."

This was a kind of "pilot study" from a suggestion in St. Martin's Guide to Writing (Axelrod & Cooper, 1991) in which I was searching for ways to become involved with the way students process their learning. I decided if you want to know what bothers them, what handicaps them, what hinders their process of written expression, then ask them. How? If I ask them verbally who knows what kind of answer I will get. So, I just tried this Memo to see how effective it would be. The results were surprising. I have two such responses in the handout because I felt they were unique and our next speaker will have many more of the more common responses that students turn in.

Students analyze their papers in a memo/letter that is attached to their essay on a separate sheet of paper. My response to the student-directed analysis offers more opportunities for learning than does the finality of most traditional methods of grading papers--a letter grade with or without comments such as: "awk," "coh," "shift."

For one thing, traditional grading not only gives the teacher the total authority and responsibility for evaluating the finished paper, it also assumes (incorrectly) that student writers do not have the ability to evaluate their own writing. Consequently and rightly so, students wait for the teacher to do the work. This is how the students are cheated out of the opportunity to draw upon the critical abilities they already have and need to develop further. Our goal it would seem is to try to find ways to shift some of that responsibility (response=ability) to the students so that they become active participants in the evaluation/revision process rather than passive recipients.

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First, I give an assignment.

For example, a narrative essay, or a definition, or persuasive essay, etc. I discuss a process of brainstorming for a topic, supporting details, drafting and revising and finally proofreading and editing. This is simply a process (it's in their text); the students are not locked in to the process I present, but I do ask them to try it and let me know how it worked--if they use another process that they feel works better, I want to know about it. Sometimes they eliminate some steps in the process which is perfectly fine, but I want them to articulate why they did whatever.

We will have peer-editing workshops where the students read each others papers and give worthy suggestions. If one of their peers does not understand a passage or referent, then it is an indication that perhaps something is unclear.

Often I do not tell the students they will have a workshop. If they think they're handing in a final paper, they are likely to do a better job (draft). The students are often amazed (and relieved) that peer editing helped them to see that what they thought was closure needed much more work.

The workshop is a good strategy for getting better papers. I do not see my role as one of seeing how many students I can fail; I'm there to guide them to writing better papers and to show them how capable they are to handle this responsibility in all of their classes.

For every essay assignment, I ask the students to write a memo to me which is called, "Learning from your own writing process." (see Appendix A) In this memo I ask them to (1) tell me what they were trying to do (were they trying to describe a scenic route, explain a situation, show how something works, argue for or against an issue, etc; (2) what seemed to work or didn't work (a part of the process that I explained and we discussed or their own process), the workshop, the peer evaluation; (3) how the paper developed and changed from invention through drafts to revision; (4) what major decisions they made in composing/revising (perhaps they had to discard a favorite sentence; (5) I also ask what part(s) they want me to look at particularly (often there is a sentence structure, a title, an ending, a difficult passage) and finally, I ask what they learned from the assignment. The memo/letter is not graded, but I will not accept an essay without one, and to this extent it has an influence on their grade. I always pen a note responding to the memo. If they ask a specific question about a problem they had, I respond to that specifically. Often their memos are as long as their essays.

Our community college students aren't any different from other college students. They groan and complain--but the more work they do, the sweeter the reward. (I groan and complain too, but it is somehow part of the great satisfaction I feel afterwards.) Students generally tell me even a year later how much work they

did in my classes, but they always add, "but I learned a lot." I think this is an added value to writing the memo--the students are gaining fluency because they are focused and writing more--just the sheer volume of writing helps them to think and express themselves clearly.

In the appendices, I've included my memo instructions (appendix A), a student memo to the assignment of writing a resume and cover letter or technical report (Appendix B - some of our returning adult students prefer to write an assignment that is connected to their positions in the work place), and a paper that answered the memo as part of the essay (Appendix C - no one had ever done that--it's okay to be creative, but the assignment still had to be done).

I conclude then, that self-evaluation, experiencing the quality of one's writing, is crucial to the development of an individual's perception of writing as an important and "natural" way to investigate problems and present ideas. Subsequently, it complements my philosophy concerning attitude. By the end of a semester, the students are more confident, they are producing better final products, and they understand the relevance of written communication.

Understanding writing depends on our process (including) a post-revision or post-editing phase of response--a reflection of where you've come from, how you arrived at where you are, and where you're going.

Having students writing letters or memos instead of teachers just assigning letter grades helps us as teachers to know how to give better assistance to our students.

Appendix A: The Memo Instructions

Extending the Context of Evaluation: Writing Letters, Not Merely Letter Grades

Learning From Your Own Writing Process

-- Write a letter or memo from you to me, telling me what you were trying to do in the paper, what seemed to work, what didn't, how the paper developed and changed from invention through drafts to revision, what major decisions you made in composing it, what parts you want me to look at in particular, and what you learned from the assignment.

-- The self-evaluation should be detailed, honest, and as informal as if you were talking to me.

Appendix B: Student Memo

MEMO TO MS Rhodes

The memo I have submitted is in direct response to The Assistant Chief of Supply. It is my job to "inspect" all publications in the Supply Squadron. For some reason, when I write up a report with findings, everyone goes on the defensive. Instead of taking this as a help, the Chief of the Branch attempted to turn it around and blame myself and the inspectors in my office for doing too "thorough" of a job. During the outbrief, he hinted that since there were so many findings that maybe the Assistant chief of supply would request that I do a check on a monthly basis to each branch (there are eight of them). His biggest complaint was that if everything was okay in March (okay back in March) why was it all wrong now?

It is truly amazing how people can make things up. I visited the branch in March, but it was a files inspection for the DA office. The branch chief I have to deal with is a very powerful person. It just happens that he has now become the Assistant Chief of Supply and had been temporarily assigned there when he made his threat regarding my extra work load. He sent a memo to my boss suggesting that I assist his old branch by doing monthly checks. This would be an overburdening task--it would also lead to other branches wanting the same "service". In answering this memo, I decided to take a stand and completely change the present procedure. I conferred with my boss and she was in agreement. She did suggest one change. Instead of making a proposal she suggested I state that this is what we would be doing and that she would back me on this. I sent this memo out last Friday and haven't heard anything yet. So many times I find you have to go around the fence to get your point across. With this memo, I was trying to sound helpful, but also letting him know that I was not going to be down in the warehouse every month doing a job that he should assign to one of his personnel.

PS. MS Rhodes--I found this class to be tough, and sometimes exhausting, but extremely helpful. By making us write about anything and everything, it makes it easier to just do it. THANKS

Comments:

Thanks to you too! When you "just do it," you notice it turns out just fine, and you can look back with pride at your accomplishment--if you've noticed, it is sometimes surprising to us exactly what our capabilities are--the potential is even greater yet!

Appendix C: Student Essay

Note: The student attempted to bypass either the essay or the memo by creating what appears to be an essay incorporating the process. (Since I don't accept essays without a memo, I gave credit for the memo here)

Nerd

The first place I attempted to find the true meaning of the word nerd was in a Webster New Dictionary, but to my despair it was not listed.

I decided to gather some information about people's ideas on what they thought a nerd was. I thought the best place to start was at home with my husband. When questioned about what he thought a nerd was Nick graciously said "someone that doesn't fit into any social set." As our conversation deepened, Nick proceeded to describe a nerd's appearance. This time he was not as kind with his choice of words. According to Nick a nerd has no style when it comes to dressing themselves. They usually wear outdated clothing. They tend to lean toward plaid pants held up with white belts. These pants are short enough to expose their entire socks. Nerds have above average intelligence, and always come totally prepared for classes with several pens and pencils neatly tucked in their shirt pocket. Very often these writing materials are placed in their trusty pocket guards; Nicks final description of nerds was, of course the masking tape on their glasses.

To further my knowledge and understanding of nerds I asked the next generation in my household to define nerds. Nine-year-old Nicholas said a nerd was a kid that "acts stupid and foolish but usually can help it." Little Nick thinks a nerd can look like anyone except they often have runny noses. Although Nicholas had all this information about nerds he denies knowing any personally.

Moving down the line I asked eight-year-old Anthony what he thought a nerd was. His response was "someone that other kids always make fund of." He said they "walk funny, have big glasses and are very clumbsy." They also wear pants that are too small. He claims he see's nerds only on television.

After all my inquirys [sic] I was determined to teach my family the true definition of nerd. To find out this information I went to the public library and looked in several books. To my surprise the word nerd was not that simple to find. I did however after much searching find it listed in the Websters 3rd New International Dictionary. There nerd was defined as unpleasant, unattractive, unstylish or insignificant person. (Influenced by nerds and turds) Incidentally nerds means nuts or crazy. This definition was not as difficult as my husband Nick's and Anthony's.

The Dictionary of Popular Slang, defines nerd as a fool. Just as little Nick has suspected.

Finally after all my searching I found some history on the word nerd in a book called Slang and Euphemism by R. Spears. According to the information in this book nerd means an oaf -- an undesirable male. It orginated back to the mid 1900's.

Concluding from all my references and personal inquiry's I think it safe to say that a nerd is a crazy, foolish and undesirable, male turd.

Comments:

Dear Grace,

What a wonderful Memo. I liked the way you set up the problem and then tried to find appropriate methods for solving it. Just a few suggestions:

(1) Try the Oxford English Dictionary
(2) Talk about the (etymology) origin and history
(3) Then use your local sources about the application of "nerd" to everyday conversation--the slang usage (family input a great technique)
(4) When you conclude, draw from this paper, but try not to end up with yet another term that needs to be defined (turd)
(5) I'm expecting a great essay out of this plan.

What do we call females who are undesirable, unstylish, etc? I will accept the essay by Monday -- please.